

IDENTITARY TRANSFORMATIONS INSIDE A ROMA COMMUNITY FOLLOWING THE ACCESSION OF ROMANIA TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract: *The paper summarizes a preliminary research part of a boarder project of studying identitary transformations in the last decades in Romanian Roma communities. We supposed these transformations are influenced by the change of the general political and economic frame, and, particularly, by the integration of the country in the European Union. Starting from the general question “what has changed in your lives during the last years?” 27 in-depth interviews with Roma ethnics were focused on four main themes: identitary values, relationship with the authorities, Europe’s image and the expectations towards the European institutions, and opinions on personal development.*

Key words: *Ethnic identity, Roma communities, identitary transformations, European integration.*

1. Introduction

The fall of communism in Eastern Europe also meant the opening of a Pandora’s Box of ethnic (but not only!) identities. Suddenly, the individuals of former equalitarian societies found themselves very different and belonging to almost forgotten or, at least, neglected groups. A rush in the quest and/or remembrance of identity values has begun, not without (often harsh) tensions between majorities and minorities. At the same time, phenomena like globalization and European integration (re)shaped these features, mainly by means of mass media. The Roma people were not an exception. While during the communist period the

official statements spoke about them only as “other nationalities”, in the last decades the “Roma people issue” became a top theme in the agendas of both public debate and academic research.

Unfortunately, about Roma in the public debate the spoken and written materials are mostly negative, be them either economic migrants in the Occident whose way of life shocks, or when it is about inter-ethnic conflicts in Eastern countries. This is the consequence of historic discriminations, as well as of the fact that Roma do not own a territory and until the modern times they were lacking a democratic political representation in almost all countries. [1]

For non-Roma, these news and images

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circulated by mass-media strengthen historic stereotypes: Roma people are thieves, beggars, dirty, unable to adapt to civilised life. Very recently, the French minister of interior Manuel Valls affirmed that “These populations [Roma] ways of life are very different than ours and are obviously conflicting [local populations way of life]” [8].

So, the image of Roma people is covered with stereotypes and this makes it one of the most unknown ethnies in Europe.

But how do Roma see themselves? Beyond which threshold an identity value becomes a defect or even a threat for the Others? A number of Roma intellectuals have struggled for the rights of minority and for the implementation of affirmative policies towards Roma people. These efforts were reasoned sociologically, economically or from a cultural and anthropologic point of view. The Roma issue has been studied very limitedly from the communication point of view, at least in Romania. The present paper is a small contribution derived from this approach.

According to the theory of social identity, in order to get a positive social identity, the individuals must “struggle”. The *social identity* thus results from belonging to a group and sums up the effects of a *comparison* made by an individual between s/he’s own group (ingroup) and other groups (outgroups). An individual’s choice of a group is determined by the degree that group helps him/her in creating a positive social identity [7]. In this respect the communicational approach is crucial.

As form of social organisation, in the classical approach, the ethnicity was considered as an “absolute essence”. Regarded as a *stage* of evolution, the ethnicity has served the political ideology of *assimilationism*, especially in the United States. A statement which appears

important to, especially from the Roma issue, is the *indigenism*: “...this concept refers to a primordial identity, to «traditional» peoples having durable ways of life which last from immemorial times” [5].

Nowadays, Roma communities are structured in clans, such as blacksmiths (fierari), coppersmiths (caldarari), wood workers (rudari) etc. [1], [3]. As previous studies have shown, the strongest identity of a Roma individual is related to his/her clan (“neam”) culture and values and relations between clans are limited and, sometimes, controversial. [6]

2. Objectives

Within the Communication and Public Relations Faculty from NSPAS (SNSPA) has been initiated a wider project to research *when* and *how* do the Roma people communicate to Others the identity features/values and how and to what extent these features are sensitive to changes, in the context of the significant socio-economic and cultural pressures of the globalised world of today. The present paper is part of this project and aims to explore the opinions about identity features within an average Roma community in Romania. By “average” we understand a fairly numerous community (over 50 families), in a peripheric area of a large city, a community exposed to strong modernization influences.

The objectives of the study were: to identify those features considered by Roma people as fundamental to the ethnic identity, the extent to which these underwent changes (according to the respondents) during the last twenty years, the identification of the main vectors of change and the resistance to change.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted in June 2013, in Bereasca neighbourhood of the city of Ploiești, where a poor, though not quite traditional, Roma community lives. It was a qualitative research, using the interview – half-structured as well as unstructured – as method [4]. During five days of meetings, we collected answers from 27 subjects (16 women, 11 men). 24 of them had only primary education (20 less than 8 classes), while three had attended high school. This main research was correlated with a series of six interviews made in Bucharest, with university graduated Roma persons (as an external reference group).

Starting from the general question “what has changed in your lives in the last years?” the discussions were focused on four main themes: identity values (language, customs, and family), relationship with the authorities, Europe’s image and the expectations towards the European institutions and opinions on personal development (attending school and having a stable job). A special issue was the access to mass media.

4. Results and Discussions

The analysis of answers highlighted a series of interesting, although quite contradictory elements. The post-communist period lead to strengthening (and even refreshing) of the traditional identity features of Roma communities, especially those regarding folklore, language and the re-evaluation of “ethnicity” in a general sense.

As for the identity values, the respondents considered, with no exception, that family and family ties (mostly kinship) as the most important value. The aggregation of community is centered on family and family ties. Within the family, from generation to generation, is

transmitted the knowledge about good and bad (or, in the respondents’ terms: about “pure and impure”), about the community hierarchy and the respect for parents.

A very important family aspect is the marriage and the way this is contracted. Generally, the marriage outside Roma community is rejected; only the situation of a Roma man marrying a non-Roma woman is tolerated. Rejected, too, but less strictly, is the marriage of Roma individuals belonging to different Roma clans (“neamuri”).

All the respondents emphasized that although the Roma marriages are not made official at the civil service; they resist in time and do not shatter. The explanation given by the respondents was that the marriages are made at very young ages, therefore their mentality is formed such as life is inconceivable for an individual without the husband, respectively the wife. This tradition of marriage at an early age is considered fundamental, a way to ensure a stable future for the children.

Another fundamental element is the buying of bride. According to answers, “a girl [virgin] is bought with a lot of money, starting from 5000 euro and even with 10000 euro, sometimes even more or with gold coins”. However, these sums are offered only in rich families.

The marriage of a Roma man to a Romanian woman is somewhat tolerated, while a marriage of a Roma woman to a Romanian man is rejected; the latter one is approved only by and for the persons “who have school”.

Curious enough for non-Roma, the respondents gave less importance to Romani language, as identity element, than to the family. Just one of the respondents did not know Romani language, two of them know it but do not use it frequently and the rest proudly declared they speak it and they only speak Romanian when among Romanians.

The Romani language is considered “very beautiful”, “full of warmth and love”, “language first spoken”. However, at the open question “which are the things you consider a Roma person is Roma?”, the language was not spontaneously mentioned. It is plausible to consider that the language being until recently only an oral language and even now with various standards in different countries, the language is not considered by Romas as defining the ethnic identity. In other words, the interviewed Roma individuals seemed to consider as identity elements only those seen and having a clear significance to the Others.

Another argument is the high identity importance Roma give to the traditional costumes, especially for women. The respondents agreed that the clothes „show we are Roma” and that they are “proud to be Roma”, contrary to the communist period, when they were “afraid to admit it”.

Regarding the traditional costumes, only three of the respondents do not wear them, two of them being students and explaining they do not wear it as not to be differentiated from their Romanian colleagues. Another responded that she wears the traditional clothes when going at parties among Roma, but at work or in town they wear common clothes.

The costume is wear out of respect for the elderly, all respondents – excepting the four mentioned above – said so got dressed their ancestors and so they do. However, from the answers one can notice that wearing the traditional costumes is not always free will behaviour; the group exerting a strong pressure. At the question “how would you react if the children would not wish to wear it?”, the majority said this was not possible, that even force might be used and the traditional clothes would be respected and wore. 16 respondents (14 women, 2 men) said they

proudly wear their costumes and do not intend to give them up, the clothes being part of “our way of being”.

Therefore, the feeling of belonging to the ethnic group exists, manifested by wearing voluntarily the traditional clothes, but there is also a very strong social constrain, mainly from the family. Especially the girls are educated from an early age in the respect, knowledge and acceptance of traditions. The prevalent opinion (20 answers) is that girls who give up the traditional clothes are “whores” and are automatically excluded from the community.

As for the future of the ethnies, of its identity, the respondents unanimously consider this is not in danger, that traditions will be further respected, in spite of small modifications.

However, one can notice the different way of thinking of those with a higher level of education. So, if the older ones say the traditional clothes will never be given up, those graduating more than the primary cycle agree that giving up gypsy clothes is necessary for a better social integration, to avoid the differentiation of Roma and Romanians. One of the respondents, a student considers in the future it is possible to give up the traditional clothes, without affecting the cultural identity.

The relationship with the authorities and with the majoritary population was in general considered as unsatisfying. Only two affirmed it is „good”, four said it is „so and so” and the rest said it is bad. The city hall is not interested in the problems of the neighbourhood and the central authorities show interest for the Roma only during election times.

As for the democratic regime and the opening which came with the European integration, the answers were positive, but reserved. The opinions were rather conformists: „it is good” (7 answers, all from youngs), “I’d gladly travel [in West],

but I'd not stay there" (3 answers), „they [Westerners] came to us, too, with support" (4 answers), „maybe these young ones will go there to earn better" (11 answers, with small variations).

At this point an influence of the European integration process was obvious – both from the media and by the meaning of institutions. However, this process, twinned with the difficulties generated by the economic crisis, rather lead to a sort of enclavisation than to the outlook of a steady development. The respondents (especially the elders) often expressed regrets towards the communist period, when “the State gave us jobs”, deplored the community's isolation, but, at once, perceived the European integration as an opportunity for the Roma people, not as much as a way for economic migration (none of the respondents in Bereasca had travelled to Western Europe), but as a more powerful authority, able to urge the Romanian government to support the Roma communities.

The study highlighted also a very low interest in institutional communication/cooperation with other Roma communities and, therefore, mistrust or scepticism towards the Roma political parties or NGOs. 16 respondents affirmed, with small variations, that “ours [Roma NGOs] make us promises and make money on behalf of us”

A number of questions referred to media consumption and the relationship of the community with the outside world. If the presence of the TV set in all the families of the respondents is not a surprise, less expected it was to notice that going to school is regarded contradictorily.

On one side, school is considered good for small children and especially for boys (as they may, afterwards, to “get the driver licence”), on the other side, many opinions were of type: „for girls school is not good because it opens up their mind” (9

answers, seven women, two men). The agreed model would be primary school for girls and eight forms or more for boys, if they „have brains”.

Whatever surprising was the importance respondents gave to direct contact with modernity: „when we go out in town, for shopping, we see what is new, what people say”.

Analysing the answers shows as main vectors for change the TV and direct contact with the outside of the community.

Another investigated aspect was the receptivity to, and the availability for changes in some identity features (marriage and clothing), for a better economic and social integration with the majority.

Quite interesting, if it was foreseeable that the younger people, with higher education, will accept these changes, we found a sharp division between men and women, the latter being far more conservative. The decreasing order of the acceptance of these changes is: young men, elder men, young women and elder women.

For example, if marriage between a Romanian man and a Roma woman was rejected by all of the respondents, young men (3) also expresses opinions such as “feelings and seriosity matters, not ethnicity”, the mature men agreed at all large extent that marriages between Roma men and non-Roma women can exist, young women said marriages should be only between Roma partners while older women restricted marriages only to Roma of the same clan/group.

The same opening for change was noticed regarding clothing: young men accepted the idea that girls, too, can get dressed untraditionally, while older women totally excluded this possibility.

A strictly qualitative interpretation of the above data could be that the post-communist transformation period lead,

firstly, to a widening of the social distance between Roma communities and the majoritary population. The withdrawal of the state from economy made Roma to adopt traditional occupations or to adopt primitive survival means (begging, collect waste etc.).

As well, the authorities' lack of interest contributed to the increase of this social distance. The pauperisation of the community correlated with this distance, contributed, paradoxically to the stimulation of the ethnic identity consciousness and awareness. The refuge in tradition and in affirming it to the outside world is, ultimately, a self-regulation mechanism of a community with limited resources.

At this point, it worth mention Zygmunt Bauman's words: "If the modern problem of identity is how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern problem of identity is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open". [2] In this respect, where is the Romanian society and where are the Roma communities? It's up to us to decide.

5. Conclusions

Concluding, the new political and institutional European frame allows the Roma communities to retrieve and/or to refresh their traditional ethnic and cultural identities, but do not offer, so far, strong expectations towards a modern, steady communitarian and individual development.

As, in the last decades, the economic and educational changes were little, the traditional identity values are a refuge in order to preserve the group's cohesion and survival.

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